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By Viola Gienger and Tony Capaccio, Bloomberg News

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(Bloomberg) -- The exit of U.S. combat troops from the last of Iraq's cities and towns today means keeping the peace will depend on stepped-up intelligence, special-forces units and stronger political reconciliation, officials say.

The U.S. military and Iraq's Interior Ministry have focused on training local intelligence officers and increasing information-sharing to defeat attempts by remaining Sunni and Shiite militants to destabilize the country.

"Everything has improved" to allow for Iraq to take over security duty from the Americans, Samir Sumaidaie, Iraq's ambassador to the U.S., said in an interview. He cautioned that Iraq has "a long way to go still."

General Ray Odierno, the commander of U.S.-led troops in Iraq, said June 28 that Iraqi forces seem to have gained enough strength and sophistication to handle the potential spike in attacks that may follow the withdrawal. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offered a similar view yesterday.

“We’ve had some horrific bombings and the loss of hundreds of lives” in recent weeks, Clinton told reporters in Washington. “But our assessment is that the Iraqis are ready, willing and able to step up to this.”

Signs of improvement also are showing up in politics, officials say. Shiite parties are recruiting Sunnis and Kurds as partners in preparation for the legislative elections scheduled in January, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Christopher Hill said in Washington this month.

Afghanistan
Shift

President Barack Obama needs Iraq to maintain relative calm for regional stability, giving the U.S. military leeway to devote more attention to Afghanistan. The U.S. will turn over the security of Iraq’s cities and towns to its own police and military, a milestone aimed at ushering the last of American forces out nationwide by the end of 2011.

The U.S. has far more military personnel in Iraq, 131,000, than in Afghanistan, where 57,000 troops and 33,000 allied forces are fighting a Taliban insurgency.

In Iraq, a wave of bombings that U.S. officials believe is intended to challenge the security transfer included a June 26 Baghdad

market attack that killed at least 15 people, according to the Associated Press.

Representative John Murtha, a Pennsylvania Democrat who heads the House Appropriations defense subcommittee, predicted "some controversies" would flare between Sunni and Shiite factions after the U.S. withdrawals.

Property Disputes

"You've got to remember, there were some 4 million people displaced around Baghdad, 2 million outside the country," Murtha told reporters on June 24. "As they come back to their property, there will be some problems."

Still, Murtha said he doesn't expect a return to the massive violence of 2006 and early 2007. Iraqis "are tired of war," he said.

Obama urged Iraqis to step up efforts to settle disputes over how to divide political power between the national government and local levels and how to distribute oil revenue.

"The biggest challenge right now is going to be less those attacks by remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq or other insurgent groups," Obama told reporters on June 26. "The bigger challenge is going to be, can the Shia, the Sunni and the Kurds resolve some of these major political issues?"

Stakes 'So High';

If disputes such as that over control of oil persist, "the stakes are so high for the parties involved in these conflicts that they will fight," said Joost Hiltermann, a Middle East specialist at the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.

The agreement with Iraq on U.S.

forces requires American combat troops to pull back to "agreed facilities and areas outside cities, villages and localities." It allows Iraq to request temporary U.S. air support for surveillance missions.

At the height of sectarian violence in 2006, Iraq lost an average of 72 civilians a day to suicide attacks, vehicle bombs and gunfire or executions, according to the Web site Iraq Body Count. This year through June 2, the daily average is 12.

Another sign pointing toward stability is that local militias aren't being formed to defend neighborhoods in response to attacks, U.S. defense officials said on the condition of anonymity.

Public opinion was the linchpin, Sumaida's said.

"The factor that really decided the fate, and sealed the fate, of al-Qaeda in Iraq and most of the extremists was the fact that the communities themselves turned against them," Sumaida's said.

Effect of Raids

One aspect of U.S. involvement that won't be reduced by the withdrawal of conventional forces is the counter-terrorism mission accelerated during the 2007 surge of American reinforcements, said Representative Adam Smith, who oversees special-forces operations as chairman of a U.S. House panel on terrorism.

U.S. intelligence agencies and elite special-forces units worked in so-called "fusion cells" that consolidated and analyzed real-time information gathered from informants' tips, satellites and eavesdropping on the location of top al-Qaeda operatives. The strategy allowed for quick strikes against suspected militants.

Besides the Sunni revolt against al-Qaeda, the raids were a reason the surge succeeded, said Smith, a Democrat from Washington state.

“They had no safe place,” said Smith. While the U.S. will increase training of Iraqi commando units for these missions, the American role “will likely be there for a much longer period of time,” he said.